
Defining the Wind Band Grade System

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It is difficult to define exactly what makes up each grade level and why a piece is a Grade 3 versus a Grade 4, but the following guidelines can be used to aid educators in their selection of music appropriate in difficulty for their band. Teachers must be aware that criteria for defining each grade varies greatly from publisher to publisher and what one may call a Grade 2, another company could define as a Grade 3.

The grading system employed here classifies pieces from Grade 1.5 to Grade 6. On the following page is a range chart providing suitable expectations for the levels (*Range Guidelines for Wind Band Music*).

There are often exceptions, to even the most specific of criteria (ie. in a jazz-based piece, trumpet 1 may be expected to play notes outside of the suggested range for that level). In general, the parameters given on the next several pages will serve to define the grades.

General items to consider:

- instrumentation varies between the grade levels (ie. 1 trombone part in Grade 1.5 but 3 in Grade 3)
- range demands increase with the levels (please see *Range Guidelines for Wind Band Music* chart)
- technical demands increase with the levels
 - woodwinds tend to get more technical parts before the brass
 - technical demands are greater for first players than second players within a section
- independent lines are limited in the lower grades with many parts doubled
- more complex rhythms and musical concepts are introduced in higher grades
- more complex time signatures are avoided in earlier grades
- key signatures and key changes are limited in younger grades
- more specialized instruments are introduced in higher grades (ie. english horn, contra bass clarinet, etc.)
- cued parts are provided for covering exposed lines (ie. horn cues in the saxophones) in younger grades
- duration of pieces increase with grade level

Transposed RANGE GUIDELINES FOR WIND BAND MUSIC

GRADE 1.5

GRADE 2

GRADE 3

GRADE 4+

This musical score provides range guidelines for various wind instruments across four grade levels: GRADE 1.5, GRADE 2, GRADE 3, and GRADE 4+. The instruments listed are Flute, Oboe, B♭ Clarinet 1,2, E♭ Alto Clarinet, B♭ Bass Clarinet, Bassoon, E♭ Alto Saxophone, B♭ Tenor Saxophone, E♭ Baritone Saxophone, B♭ Trumpet 1,2, F Horn, Trombone/Baritone, and Tuba. Each instrument's part is shown on a staff with a key signature of one flat (B♭) and a common time signature (C). The notes are placed on the staff to indicate the recommended range for each grade level. For example, the Flute part shows a range from G4 to B4 for Grade 1.5, expanding to C5 for Grade 4+. The Trombone/Baritone part shows a range from G2 to B2 for Grade 1.5, expanding to C3 for Grade 4+.

Grade 1.5

These are pieces that the students first play once they are out of the method books. This level music should be playable by students with one to two years playing experience. Many bands at this level may not have a balanced instrumentation so the writing must take this into account through doubling parts and cues.

Key elements:

- limited duration of pieces (1-3 minutes)
- limited keys are used (F, Bb, Eb)
- limited time signatures are used (4/4, 3/4, 2/4 and possibly 6/8)
- limited rhythms - most are played in large groups (ie. all brass play a rhythm together)
- limited range (please see *Range Guidelines for Wind Band Music* chart)

The full band instrumentation is used but with the following considerations:

- considerable doubling is done to add strength and security to each musical line
- instruments such as oboe, alto clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, baritone saxophone and horn are “covered” in other parts to allow for the above listed instruments to be absent from the band
- the majority of the melody lines are found in the flute, clarinet, alto saxophone, trumpet with a general “bass instrument” line allowing for Grade 1.5 level music to be played by a small and unbalanced group of players (ie. 5 flutes, 3 clarinets, 6 alto saxophones, 4 trumpets, 1 trombone, 1 baritone, 1 tuba and 5 percussion)
- the bass line is made up of unison (and octave) playing by the alto clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, tenor saxophone, trombone, baritone and tuba
- the clarinets often do not cross the break or if they do, only clarinet 1
- trumpet 1 range demands are greater than what is expected from trumpet 2
- independent lines are limited to flute, clarinet 1, alto saxophone and trumpet 1

Typical instrumentation:

Flute
Oboe
Clarinet 1
Clarinet 2
Alto Clarinet
Bass Clarinet
Bassoon
Alto Saxophone
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone
Trumpet 1
Trumpet 2
F Horn
Trombone
Baritone bass clef
Baritone treble clef
Tuba
Percussion - Timpani, Bells, Snare/Bass Drum, Cymbals, Auxiliary instruments

Grade 2

This is usually a large step forward from Grade 1.5 music. The instrumentation rounds into a more complete band with instruments such as oboe, bass clarinet and baritone saxophone possibly being included. More is expected in terms of technique and independent lines with the woodwinds being relied upon to provide the more technical flourishes. Because of the large number of flutes, clarinets and alto saxophones, there are more divisions of the parts to allow for the difference in abilities (ie. clarinet 1 is expected to cross the break but clarinet 2 may not be).

Key elements:

- duration of pieces (2-5 minutes)
- keys used (F, Bb, Eb, Ab) - most pieces will have key changes
- time signatures used (4/4, 3/4, 2/4, 2/2 and 6/8)
- more complex rhythms are introduced - some sixteenths in some parts

Typical instrumentation:

Flute
Oboe
Clarinet 1
Clarinet 2
Alto Clarinet
Bass Clarinet
Bassoon
Alto Saxophone 1
Alto Saxophone 2
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone
Trumpet 1
Trumpet 2
F Horn
Trombone 1
Trombone 2
Baritone bass clef
Baritone treble clef
Tuba
Percussion - Timpani, Bells, Chimes, Vibes,
Snare/Bass Drum, Cymbals, Auxiliary instruments

Grade 3

Grade 3 music is intended for a larger band with a fairly balanced instrumentation. More independent writing is found in many parts and less doubling occurs. With the increased size of the band, there are more divisions within each section - clarinet 3, trumpet 3, horn 2 and trombone 3 are typically added.

Range demands for the brass increase and oboe solos may start to appear (although often still cued in another part). The music is more complex and more musical lines or ideas are added simultaneously. Key and metre changes are more common and could occur frequently. There are some pieces with multi movements.

Key elements:

- duration of pieces (4-10 minutes)
- keys used (F, Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, C)
- time signatures used (4/4, 3/4, 2/4, 2/2, 6/8)
- more complex rhythms are introduced - many parts have 16th notes
- number of percussion parts may increase

Typical instrumentation:

Flute 1
Flute 2
Oboe 1
Oboe 2
Clarinet 1
Clarinet 2
Clarinet 3
Alto Clarinet
Bass Clarinet
Bassoon 1
Bassoon 2
Alto Saxophone 1
Alto Saxophone 2
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone
Trumpet 1
Trumpet 2
Trumpet 3
F Horn 1
F Horn 2
Trombone 1
Trombone 2
Trombone 3
Baritone bass clef
Baritone treble clef
Tuba
Percussion - Timpani, Bells, Chimes, Vibes, Marimba,
Snare/Bass Drum, Cymbals, Auxiliary instruments

Grade 4

The guidelines for what defines Grade 4 are an extension of what can be expected in Grade 3. The pieces are longer, more complex, more soloistic and more technically challenging. Multi-movement works are common.

The size of the ensemble remains basically the same but the demands are greater in terms of skill, endurance and musicality. The character and style of the pieces start to vary from movement to movement or from section to section, encouraging more musical versatility.

Time signatures such as 12/4, 3/2 and even 7/8 may appear.

There are solos and/or soloistic lines for many players including piccolo, oboe, horn and baritone.

16th notes should be expected in all parts with some 32nds in the upper woodwinds and mallet percussion. Horn parts are more independent and less cueing is used.

Typical instrumentation:

Piccolo
Flute 1
Flute 2
Oboe 1
Oboe 2
Clarinet 1
Clarinet 2
Clarinet 3
Alto Clarinet
Bass Clarinet
Bassoon 1
Bassoon 2
Alto Saxophone 1
Alto Saxophone 2
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone
Trumpet 1
Trumpet 2
Trumpet 3
F Horn 1
F Horn 2
F Horn 3
F Horn 4
Trombone 1
Trombone 2
Trombone 3
Baritone bass clef
Baritone treble clef
Tuba
Piano
Percussion - Timpani, Bells, Chimes, Vibes, Marimba,
Snare/Bass Drum, Cymbals, Auxiliary instruments

Grade 5 and Grade 6

The differences between Grade 5 and Grade 6 are difficult to identify and define. Pieces may be written with no key signature and the compositional devices such as aleatoric playing and graphic notation can be used extensively. The range and technical demands are approaching what is expected from a professional orchestral musician. All rhythms, modes and even atonality are elements that can be found in these levels including polyrhythms and extensive shifting metres.

Grade 5 music is technically challenging and, more often than not, still employs conventional instrumentation, scoring and voicings. Grade 6 music tends to be more individual writing and the instrumentation of the ensemble could be quite varied.

Grade 6 music is intended for professionals as well as college/university ensembles. There are basically no limits as far as all musical aspects are concerned - range, technique, instrumentation and soloistic playing. All parts can be quite virtuosic calling upon control over the full range of the instrument.

Instruments such as english horn, soprano clarinet, contra bass clarinet, soprano saxophone, flugel horn and harp are employed to add greater diversity to the sound of the wind band.

It should be noted that there was a trend, in pieces written for military band, for the instrumentation to include parts for soprano clarinet and the trumpet parts were often scored for 3 cornets and 2 trumpets. This is true of a great number of Grade 4-6 music written from 1900-1970s. This is not as true in more modern pieces but this scoring is still occasionally found.

Works that are written for these highest levels could be intended for a wind ensemble, which is basically one player per part, or a symphonic band, which could be quite a large band. Conductors selecting repertoire for their band should be cautious of pieces intended for one sized group or another.